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## Playing Politics with Bioethics: Now *That's* Repugnant [1]

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In a recent *Washington Post* editorial,[2] Leon Kass claimed that neither he nor the President's Council on Bioethics (PCB) is "playing politics with science." At this point, it is clear that nobody really buys this claim. Nonetheless, even if they are not playing politics with science, someone certainly *is* playing politics with bioethics, which is just as unacceptable, if not worse.

Many responses to Kass' *Washington Post* editorial have already indicated significant skepticism regarding whether the views of the new appointees to the PCB were really "completely unknown" to Kass.[3] Most of these cite passages from previous articles containing statements of the views held by Benjamin Carson, Peter Lawler, and Diana Schaub, and although it's good to have as much supporting evidence as possible when accusing someone of being a liar, there is no *need* to go beyond the piece itself to expose the lie.

In the *Washington Post* editorial, Kass claims that the work of the PCB was going to be shifting to issues relating to "neuroscience, brain, and behavior" and that Lawler has "written searchingly about the psychology of mood-altering drugs" but that the views of Lawler and the other newly appointed members of the panel are "completely unknown". How could Kass have been in a position to assess whether Lawler had "written searchingly" or otherwise about an issue unless Kass had been exposed to Lawler's work? Perhaps Lawler's scholarly publications are more suspenseful than those I am accustomed to reading, and whoever told Kass that Lawler had "written searchingly" didn't want to spoil the surprise ending, but I doubt it. Instead, I am led to conclude that either Kass was just careless in writing his editorial piece and failed to note the apparent inconsistency in his claims or that the piece contains a flagrant lie regarding Kass' degree of familiarity with the work of the new appointees. Like many others who have responded to Kass' editorial, I am inclined to believe the latter.

In addition to serious doubts about the credibility of Kass' claim that the views of Carson, Lawler, and Schaub were "completely unknown," there are equally serious problems with Kass' assertions regarding the dismissal of William May and Elizabeth Blackburn. Kass claims that May had intended to serve on the council for only two years and that May had "indicated his interest in stepping down," but he doesn't provide a

definitive reason for Blackburn's dismissal.[4] While it is conceivable that May wanted to step down, it's still not entirely clear *why*, and it's equally reasonable to believe that he was dismissed because of his opposition to a ban or moratorium on research cloning, especially considering the views of the only other dismissed council member. According to one recent article, "May said...that it wasn't his choice to leave the council,"[5] and the fact that May has "happily agreed to serve as a senior consultant for the council's new work on aging and the care of the elderly," suggests that May is far from completely retiring. But at least there was some *prima facie* plausibility to Kass' account of May's dismissal. Blackburn's case is entirely different, however, and Kass' neglect to provide any explanation regarding Blackburn's dismissal, combined with Blackburn's subsequent public statements about her being fired,[6] suggest that there are underlying reasons that are being concealed.

Although I see Kass as a marginalized individual in the world of bioethics, as he holds views that are unpopular among more mainstream bioethicists, I must disclose that I have always appreciated his articulation of those views and his willingness to make them known to the public (or at least to those in the world of bioethics). And, while I won't elaborate on this point here, it is also worth pointing out that I have found myself in agreement with Kass on more than one occasion. At any rate, given Kass' years of persistence in "going against the grain" and his refusal to conform within the sphere of bioethics, it is astonishing that his search for the truth seems to have been so easily undermined by the political agenda of the Bush administration and obscured by a dogmatic attachment to his own views. To allow one's own views to obscure the pursuit of the truth is always frowned upon, but for a person in such a prominent and powerful position to do so, is inexcusable. And when it involves someone, like Kass, who's been so committed to earnest inquiry into bioethical issues since bioethics was itself a budding discipline, it is especially disconcerting.

Kass may not be everyone's choice for a representative of the bioethics community, but there is a sense in which he is precisely that. Most people are unaware of what bioethics is or what bioethicists do, and Kass and the PCB may represent the only exposure many Americans will ever have to the subject. Whether anyone is pleased with Kass' role as a representative of bioethics, his position does make him something of a vanguard for the bioethics community, and such a role carries with it a greater obligation to protect and maintain the integrity and reputation of the discipline. Sadly, one of the highest-profile bioethicists in the U.S. has allowed politics to become the name of the game.

With accusations flying that certain members of the bioethics community are mercenaries, willing to sell themselves to the highest bidder and formulate an "objective" moral opinion that serves the interests of the corporation to which they've sold themselves,[7] the last thing bioethics needed was for the head of the PCB to acquiesce to the demands of the current administration's political agenda, or to appear to have done so. If bioethics is to be taken seriously by the American public, it is important that bioethicists—especially those who are most prominent in the public eye—

refrain from backing away from a commitment to objective moral inquiry under pressure from either corporate America or the government.

While it seems that Kass is implicated in an unsettling betrayal of the practice of bioethics, his precise role in the recent goings-on remains opaque. Was this reshuffling of the deck a deliberate attempt on Kass' part to skew the panel? Was Kass' hand forced by the current administration? Or was it some combination of the two? In any case, it would be tremendously helpful if Kass would provide the public with a less disingenuous account of the dismissal of May and Blackburn and the subsequent appointment of what seem to be ideological clones of Kass.

Finally, if Kass wants to ensure that future reports written by the PCB will "earn the respect of fair-minded readers," he needs to assure the public that the reports were generated secondary to an equally fair-minded series of deliberations and not the product of "selling out" to the current administration's election year agenda. Though he claims that the PCB "remains diverse," there can be no doubt that the diversity has been watered down with these new appointments. As a consequence, fair-minded deliberation is going to be more, not less, difficult. Given Kass' apparent commitment in previous years to keep everyone honest, I am left wondering whether Kass has recently misplaced his repugnance detector or at least forgotten to replace its batteries.

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[1] Although Dr. Pearson is an Associate Editor of the *Journal of Philosophy, Science & Law*, the views expressed in this editorial are her own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors and staff of the Journal.

[2] Leon Kass, "We Don't Play Politics with Science," *Washingtonpost.com*, March 3, 2004. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A24742-2004Mar2.html>.

[3] Ronald Bailey, "Leon Kass Learns to Spin: Sage of Bioethics Wants you to Think He Knows Nothing," *ReasonOnline*, March 3, 2004 <http://www.reason.com/links/links030304.shtml>; Timothy Noah, "Leon Kass, You Silly Ass: Please Stop Denying You Tilted the Bioethics Panel," March 8, 2004. <http://slate.msn.com/id/2096848/>.

[4] Kass, "We Don't Play Politics with Science"

[5] David Kohn and Julie Bell, "2 Appointees Defend Place on Bioethics Panel: Bush Critics Say Politics, Not Science, Ruled Choice," *Baltimoresun.com*, March 2, 2004. <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/nationworld/bal-te.ethics02mar02,0,1153642,print.story?coll=bal-nationworld-headlines>.

[6] Elizabeth Blackburn, "A 'Full Range' of Bioethical Views Just Got Narrower," *Washingtonpost.com*, March 7, 2004. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A35471-2004Mar6.html>.

[7] Raymond De Vries, "Businesses Are Buying The Ethics They Want" *Washingtonpost.com*, February 8, 2004. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A20624-2004Feb6&notFound=true>; Carl Elliott, "Not-So-Public Relations: How the Drug Industry is Branding Itself with Bioethics," *Slate*, December 15, 2003 <http://slate.msn.com/id/2092442/>; Paula Park, "Celebrity Ethics: Ethicists Have Become the Voice of Science in the Media," *The Scientist* 17, no. 23, December 1, 2003 [http://www.the-scientist.com/yr2003/dec/prof3\\_031201.html](http://www.the-scientist.com/yr2003/dec/prof3_031201.html); William Saletan, "The Ethicist's New Clothes," *Slate*, August 17, 2001 <http://slate.msn.com/?id=113959&>.